Filling the Gaps: Learning and Sharing What Works Best for Food Security

Achieving global food security won't come easily. We've set ambitious goals for reducing poverty, hunger and undernutrition through the Feed the Future initiative. To accomplish them, we have to strategically and efficiently use of our financial, intellectual and technical resources to develop and execute highly-effective programs.

The truth is there's no silver bullet for food security. The causes of food insecurity are complex, varied, and often stubborn. So, a large component of the U.S. Government's strategy to improve global food security focuses on learning more about which approaches are the most effective and sustainable for addressing the root causes of poverty and hunger.

Asking (and Answering!) Critical Questions

We still face gaps in evidence on what works best to achieve food security, so we're working to fill them. To get to the answers, Feed the Future has woven the goal of strategic learning into all aspects of the programming cycle, including:

• Project design and implementation (building in evaluations and incorporating pilot models)
• Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of program progress and results (determining what's working and what's not working)
• Knowledge management (documenting, sharing and applying what we've learned)

Our first step down this ambitious path was to create the **Feed the Future Learning Agenda**, which helped us strategize how we'll learn from our programs and systematically assess the most critical evidence gaps. Acting as a framework and centered around six themes, the Agenda prioritizes critical questions around food security that we want to answer through our programs, such as:

> *What are the best ways to integrate agriculture, nutrition, and health programs to ensure improvements in nutritional status in communities plagued with hunger?*
>
> *Which agricultural productivity interventions have the greatest impact on resilience of households and individuals to recover from or withstand common and extreme shocks?*

To answer questions like these and others, we've focused our M&E tools and resources around the Learning Agenda and will comprehensively analyze and synthesize our M&E findings to illuminate solutions. Analytical and M&E tools like impact evaluations, rigorous performance evaluations, geo-spatial information system (GIS) analysis, the new **Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index**, and cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness analyses play vital roles in generating these answers.

Many agencies and offices in the U.S. Government are dedicating intellectual and financial capital to **make learning like this happen**. U.S. Government collaboration includes:

• USAID's Bureau for Food Security
• USAID Missions
• USAID's Food for Peace Office
• The Millennium Challenge Corporation
• The U.S. Department of Agriculture
• Peace Corps

In particular, we're breaking new ground with our plan to conduct impact evaluations. Aligning with **USAID's Evaluation Policy** (pdf), Feed the Future is currently planning, designing or implementing nearly 40 impact evaluations (randomized control-trials or quasi-experimental studies) that will help answer questions on the Learning Agenda. To ensure these studies

are well-conceived, build on existing evidence, and fill critical evidence gaps, we are conducting full literature reviews this year of existing studies. So far, we have developed annotated bibliographies of relevant studies for each of the Learning Agenda themes, including **nutrition** and **gender**.

Sharing What We Learn

In addition to our ambitious M&E agenda, Feed the Future is using new and innovative tools to better share our findings with the world. We support online training webinars around topics like **target setting**, host Twitter Chats on topics like the **Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index**, and discuss process and findings through our **It's All About M&E** blog on Agrilinks,.

We've also established a series of events for exchanging knowledge and learning called Global Learning and Evidence Exchanges (GLEEs). GLEEs offer opportunities for knowledge exchange, sharing of good practices, and practical application of evidence that help us and our partners achieve better and sustainable outcomes. So far we've held GLEEs on some of Feed the Future's **crosscutting issues** including the intersection of food security and agriculture with **resilience**, **climate change and natural resources management**, and **agriculture and nutrition**. We're currently planning a GLEE on gender as well.

We're also collaborating with other donors and development partners to integrate our learning endeavors into a broader agenda for learning around food security. For example, we helped create the M&E harmonization group with about 10 other donor and development partners working in food security. Though still new, this group has already started to develop a common framework for programming M&E resources and to identify opportunities for coordination. We'll post the common framework in coming months.

Global food security is a complex problem, but by asking critical questions and coordinating our tools, resources and learning, we're filling in evidence gaps, learning, and sharing what works. We're discovering what works most efficiently and most cost-effectively to address the root causes of global food insecurity so we can work together as a global community to end poverty and hunger.

*Have any innovative ideas on how we can improve learning around Feed the Future? Let us know on **Facebook**, **Twitter**, or visit **Agrilinks.org** to share!*

Quick Links

- **Feed the Future Learning Agenda**
- **Feed the Future Learning Agenda Inventory**
- **Feed the Future Learning Agenda Annotated Bibliography for Gender**
- **Feed the Future Learning Agenda Annotated Bibliography for Nutrition**
- **Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index**